



CLARK COUNTY

HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION

Public Service Center
1300 Franklin St., 6th Floor
Vancouver, WA
www.clark.wa.gov/planning/historic

December 5, 2019

TO: Mayor Anne McEnerny-Ogle
Councilmember Bart Hansen
Councilmember Bill Turlay
Councilmember Ty Stober
Councilmember Linda Glover
Councilmember Laurie Lebowsky
Councilmember Erik Paulsen
Councilmember-Elect Sarah Fox

City of Vancouver Council Members:

The Clark County Historic Preservation Commission is writing this letter to express serious concern about the process used to approve Phase I of the *Aegis* development of the historic Providence Academy site. These concerns result from the actions taken by the City of Vancouver and the developer following our formal review in 2018 and are heightened by additional information that has come to light, including the announced plans for a Phase II development. Therefore, we believe it is timely to raise our concerns with the City in an effort to see that our recommendations are better addressed as part of the review process for any future development on the Providence Academy site.

It is the Commission's position that the approval of Phase I of the redevelopment of the Providence Academy site has three major deficiencies:

1. The proposal was approved even though it ***deviates from sound preservation principles and standards and is incompatible with the Providence Academy site.***
2. When approving Phase I of the *Aegis* development the City ***did not appropriately follow*** the cultural resource protections required in state and local law by the State Environmental Protection Act (*SEPA*).
3. Even the minimal preservation requirements in the *Vancouver Municipal Code* ***were not sufficiently enforced***, and the City's interpretation of those requirements is at odds with the plain meaning of the code language.

These and other areas create grave concern about the preservation of this important historic place, indeed, "one of the most significant pieces of historic architecture in the Northwest."¹ These concerns naturally transition into the review and approval of any future development on the Providence Academy site. In order to alleviate our concerns, we ask the City to consider the following recommendations:

1. Fully enforce the existing preservation requirements in the Vancouver Code on all future permits including, but not limited to, fully enforcing the requirement to preserve views from Evergreen Boulevard.
2. Revise the Vancouver Municipal Code to update the preservation requirements for the Heritage Overlay District that contains Providence Academy so that they effectively protect the building and site.
3. Fully follow the SEPA process, including performing an adequate assessment of impacts and requiring full implementation of mitigation measures for those impacts, including:

¹ National Register of Historic Places nomination for Providence Academy.

- Apply the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards* to all development on the site as an absolute minimum mitigation measure.
- Place Providence Academy on the Clark County Heritage Register so that it can be afforded the fullest measure of preservation protection available.
- Require the development and release of a comprehensive preservation plan for the site.

Together, these recommendations will aid in the protection of Vancouver's most historic building. Attached to this letter is a report that outlines our concerns in greater detail. We would appreciate a written response to this letter.

On behalf of the Clark County Historic Preservation Commission,



Alex Gall

Chair, Clark County Historic Preservation Commission



Sean Denniston

Vice-Chair, Clark County Historic Preservation Commission

Cc: Eric Holmes, City Manager

Chad Eiken, Director Community and Economic Development

David Pearson, CEO The Historic Trust

Allyson Brooks, Ph.D., State Historic Preservation Officer, Washington Department of Archaeology and Historic Preservation



CLARK COUNTY HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION

INTRODUCTION:

First, we would like to place the site and this Commission's role in context. Our members have degrees in history, historic preservation and archaeology with years of experience in historic preservation. The Clark County Historic Preservation Commission is "the county's primary resource in matters of historic preservation." As such, one of the commission's responsibilities is to "provide information, comment, and support to the public and agencies on matters related to historic preservation."² It is in this capacity that the commission is issuing this report.

Providence Academy is the last remaining building constructed by Mother Joseph of the Sisters of Providence. Mother Joseph is a very significant figure in the history of not just Vancouver and Clark County, but the whole Pacific Northwest. The first female architect in the Washington Territory and the builder of 29 schools and hospitals, she is nicknamed "the Builder." She is so significant that a sculpture of Mother Joseph is one of two representing the state of Washington in Statuary Hall at the US Capital, and Providence Academy is depicted on the base of that sculpture. The Providence Academy site is on the National Register of Historic Places, the highest level of recognition for historic sites and buildings in the US. According to the Vancouver Municipal Code, Providence Academy is the "most important historic building in downtown Vancouver."³

Our three primary concerns are outlined in detail below.

CONCERN #1: *The proposed development deviates from sound preservation principles and standards.*

The *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation* contains principles for effective historic preservation and provides guidance for preservation projects. The *Standards* are especially relevant and important for the continued preservation of the Providence Academy because they are frequently used to establish eligibility for preservation funding such as Historic Preservation Tax Credits. The proposed development disregards multiple *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation*, but one is of particular concern:

#9. New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction shall not destroy historic materials that characterize the property. The new work shall be differentiated from the old and *shall be compatible with the massing, size, scale, and architectural features to protect the historic integrity of the property and its environment.*



Rendering provided by the applicant for CCHPC review.

The proposed development does not provide compatible massing, size or scale; the buildings are larger, bulkier and more dominant. The massive development transforms the Academy from the "dominant landmark,"

² Vancouver Municipal Code 20.220.050(C)

³ Vancouver Municipal Code 20.510.020(A)(1)



CLARK COUNTY HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION

described by the Vancouver Municipal Code, into a secondary building on its own site. Along those lines, the proposed buildings create a visual and physical barrier between the Academy and the revitalizing downtown core, significantly impacting public visibility of Providence Academy, which in turn impacts its viability as a commercial building. Accentuating historic assets is a well-established strategy for preservation and downtown revitalization; however, this development does the opposite by hiding and de-emphasizing the Academy.

Of further concern, The Historic Trust has consistently branded their effort for Providence Academy as a "Redevelopment Plan" rather than a "Preservation Plan." An appeal to economic feasibility has been repeatedly used as justification for the development proposal; however, a feasibility study that examines the myriad other available preservation strategies – and establishes why they are not feasible – has never been provided. When questioned, Historic Trust staff stated that some strategies were not pursued at all in favor of development while they were simply unaware of others. The result is a plan where preservation has consistently taken a back seat to development.

To be clear, the Commission does not oppose development on this site. Development can be a powerful and appropriate preservation tool; however, any development must be compatible with Providence Academy, its outbuildings and its site. It is the position of the Commission that this development is not appropriately compatible and will be detrimental to the preservation of Providence Academy and its architecturally and historically significant features, now and in the future.

ISSUE #2: *The cultural resource protections required in state and local law were not adequately followed.*

The State Environmental Protection Act (SEPA) requires that jurisdictions assess and mitigate the impact of their actions (such as issuing permits) on environment and cultural resources.⁴ The *Aegis* project was approved as a "planned action" where the environmental and cultural impact was assessed and mitigation measures identified in the 2006 Environmental Impact Study (EIS) for the Vancouver City Center Vision Subarea Plan (VCCVSP). Vancouver code and state law establish the conditions under which a project can be approved as a planned action.⁵ Two are especially pertinent:

1. The impacts of the planned action project must be adequately addressed in the EIS⁶
2. The impacts of the planned action must be adequately mitigated by the measures identified in the EIS⁷

Neither of these conditions was met when the *Aegis* project was approved, specifically:

- **Inadequate Impact Assessment:** The EIS historical sketch never mentioned Mother Joseph or Providence Academy, despite their importance to the history of Vancouver, the downtown area and the entire region. The under-representation of women and their historical significance is lamentably a common problem. Similarly, even though Providence Academy has been identified by the City of Vancouver as the most significant building in the city, the EIS never addressed adverse impacts on Providence Academy specifically and individually. Impacts were always assessed in groups of buildings that included Providence Academy, rather than Providence Academy specifically. Therefore, although the EIS determined that development would have an adverse impact on Providence Academy, the assessment of that impact is far from adequate, especially for the most significant building in the city of Vancouver.
- **Inadequate Impact Mitigation:** Even though, in the view of the Commission, the impact evaluation is inadequate, the EIS does identify mitigation measures for the adverse impacts development will have on

⁴ WAC 197-11 & VMC 20.790

⁵ VMC 20.790.530 & WAC 197-11-172

⁶ VMC 20.790.530(4) & WAC 197-11-172(1)(b)

⁷ VMC 20.790.530(6) & WAC 197-11-172(1)(a)



CLARK COUNTY HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION

Providence Academy. In addition to existing code preservation requirements, the EIS recommended four mitigation measures, notably listing Providence Academy on the Clark County Heritage Register and following the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards* for development projects. Yet, none of these four mitigation measures were applied to the *Aegis* project approval.

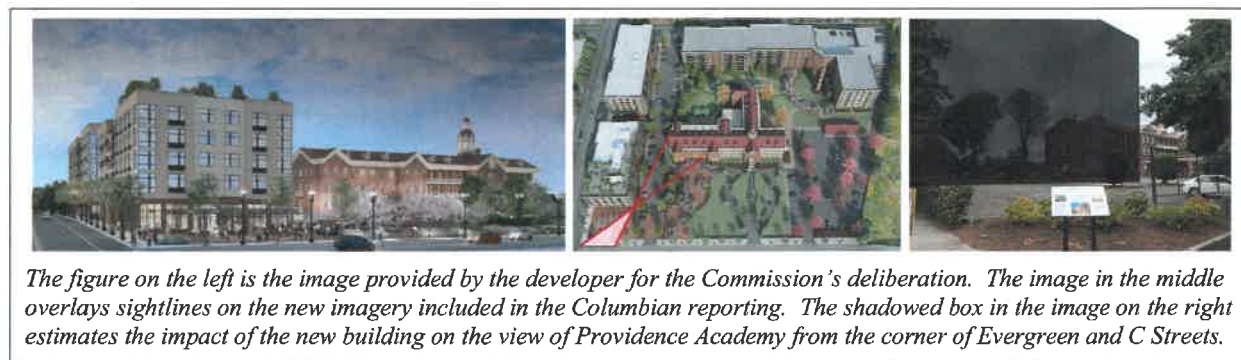
In the City's own opinion, development in downtown will have an adverse impact on Providence Academy that will need to be mitigated. Yet the City did not follow its own recommendations to mitigate that impact. It is the position of the Commission that the *Aegis* project was inappropriately approved as a planned action and that a supplemental assessment that addresses Providence Academy directly should have been required in accordance with SEPA requirements.⁸

ISSUE #3: *Even the minimal preservation requirements in the VMC were not sufficiently enforced.*

The Vancouver Municipal Code requires the protection of views of Providence Academy from Evergreen Blvd:

*New construction ... shall be so located and designed as to preserve views of the main Academy building from East Evergreen Boulevard between the freeway and C Street.*⁹

The proposed development will block the perspective view from the corner of Evergreen and C Street. Although the blocked view represents only a small stretch of Evergreen, the view that is blocked is one of the principal views of the main Providence Academy building and the view that connects Providence Academy to downtown. As such, it is one of the most important and significant views of the building.



*The figure on the left is the image provided by the developer for the Commission's deliberation. The image in the middle overlays sightlines on the new imagery included in the *Columbian* reporting. The shadowed box in the image on the right estimates the impact of the new building on the view of Providence Academy from the corner of Evergreen and C Streets.*

When this proposal was presented to the Commission at the August 15, 2018 public meeting, the developer showed an image (above) that purportedly showed this view mostly preserved, and as a result the Commission could not come to a unified recommendation about this issue. However, recent imagery published in the *Columbian*¹⁰ reveals that this view will actually be largely lost. It has become clear that the image offered by the developer actually shows a view from C Street behind the library – a view that will never be seen – and not the critical view from Evergreen Blvd.

The City's final staff report approving the *Aegis* development offered a justification for not fully enforcing this requirement. It reasoned that since development is completely prohibited on part of the site, but allowed on other parts, the requirement to preserve views cannot be taken to protect all of the views. We think there is a fundamental flaw in this reasoning. If only "most" of the views were required to be preserved, then the requirement would say "most views." If the requirement only required the preservation of views to the main part of the Academy and the

⁸ VMC 20.790.530(F) & WAC 197-11-172(2)(b)

⁹ VMC 20.510.020(A)(3)(e)

¹⁰ "Developers debut plans for Providence Academy's 'Phase II.'" *The Columbian*. September 26, 2019.



CLARK COUNTY HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION

cupola – as the developer contended at the public meeting and the staff report subsequently echoed – it would have stated as much.

There is a more reasonable interpretation that would reconcile the preservation of the views and the allowance of development. As seen when the restaurant building was still standing, it is possible to have low-rise development while reasonably preserving the views. In fact, when this requirement was adopted, only low-rise development was permitted on the Academy site. Height limits in the zoning code are limits, not a guarantee to develop the site to the full height. This interpretation reconciles the two parts of the code rather than using one part to nullify another.

This code requirement was established to preserve views of the Academy, and the Commission does not agree with an interpretation that weakens that requirement to the point where one of the most important views is not actually preserved. Such an interpretation is detrimental to the preservation of the Academy and contradicts the explicit language of the code.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

While the Commission outlined only three major issues above, we have multiple additional concerns, such as:

1. The apparent lack of a comprehensive preservation plan for the site. A site of this significance needs a preservation plan that guides the future management of the site.
2. The inappropriateness of the conversion of so much of a site historically dedicated to the public good into private, high-end residential use.
3. The sale of such a large portion of the site to a for-profit developer who may not always show the same commitment to preservation as the non-profit Historic Trust.
4. That the long-term revenue from the development of the site – and Vancouver tax dollars in the form of tax credits – will be flowing out of state instead of directly to the long-term preservation of Providence Academy.
5. A substantial reduction in parking for the Academy could harm future viability of the commercial space in the Academy building.
6. The significant public opposition that has been raised in the form of numerous critical Letters to the Editor, public comments to the CCHPC public meeting, and a public petition opposing the development, and the impact this opposition could have on future preservation and fundraising efforts.
7. Every formally trained preservationist who submitted public comment was critical of the proposed development.

SUMMARY

The Commission has an obligation to the community to publicly outline our concerns about the impacts that the proposed development is expected to have on the historical and architectural character of the Providence Academy site. Providence Academy is a valuable, irreplaceable historic resource that requires focused preservation intent and practice. We recognize the importance of revitalizing the downtown core of Vancouver. We also understand that preservation can require compromise and prioritization, especially for sites and structures whose original use is no longer viable. However, it is the position of the Commission that the compromises and priorities behind the proposed development are not appropriate for Providence Academy, the most significant historic building in Vancouver.